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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a case study of a school-wide action research project to increase student learning in a rural intermediate school. First, it provides background information on the action research model and notes such challenges as the difficulty in providing teachers with a "coaching" style of professional development and the increasing need to use distance education delivery models to support educators in rural and remote schools. The second section describes development of the U-LEARN (Utah Local Education Action Research Network) program, which originated as a six-credit semester course. The following section reviews results of collaborative efforts and factors in the five regions of the Utah Action Research Initiative, stressing onsite teaching instruction enhanced by online course support. Next, the development of the action research program at a specific school is detailed, including three training sessions scheduled for October, December, and April, and on-going support as teachers conduct their own action research projects. Preliminary results indicated the value of the collaborative perspective and onsite teaching; the feasibility of working with one school faculty, delivering one action strategy or intervention, and gathering data based on a common design; and the effectiveness of the Action Research Workbook developed by the project. (Contains 12 references.) (DB)

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# INFLUENCING STUDENT LEARNING: A SCHOOL-WIDE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Action research is the systematic study of teaching and school practices. The action research model promotes inquiry based and contextually driven professional development often focused on student learning. The application of the action research process focuses on the educator and increasing their knowledge base, deepening understanding of self and teaching as well as extending professional and personal wisdom. The purposes of this case study paper are to; a) provide appropriate background information on the action research model and challenges, b) outline an action research program designed to serve the needs of Utah educators, c) describe the collaborative factors and efforts used to implement a school-wide project focused on increasing student learning in a rural intermediate school, d) outline teaching model and strategies, and e) present preliminary findings from the case study.

*Background Information*

Action research or teacher research is a form of reflective practice based on the principles associated with systematic inquiry of one's own educational practice. Historically, action research was embedded in social action and critical perspectives required to illuminate issues of curriculum and the social structure of schooling (Stenhouse, 1975). Throughout the decade of the 1990s, action research, and its various forms of participatory inquiry began to emerge in graduate programs and higher education focused professional development endeavors. However, in recent years, action research has become an increasingly popular form of K12 professional development (Licklider,1997; Lytle and McGuire,1993). Its popularity can be noted in K12 staff development guides, school reform efforts, and workshops (Halsall,1998; Harris, 1998).

The popularization of action research has created several challenges for educators who believe that this model of professional development is, by its very nature, different from the more traditional forms of training, workshops, and inservice education. Firstly, many educators working in the professional development area argue that an inquiry model requires sustained instructional strategies that engage the participant in time consuming, labor intensive, and emotionally charged activities. As a result, participants must be provided with a "coaching" style of instruction that supports the participants' as they question, probe, and sort their own teacher thinking as well as their practices, perspectives, values, and those of their students. However, as action research has expanded into the arena of district promoted staff development (Kochendorfer, 1997; Lytle, 1996), there has been a tendency to reduce its conceptual, instructional, and contextually-driven frameworks into more discreet packages of "how to" or "tidy tips" approaches demanded by overworked and highly-pressured classroom teachers. Presented in workshops or through a video-production source, educators are often left with either an ineffective "quick and dirty" action research workshop or a overwhelming feeling of frustration and resolve to never entertain action research again.

Secondly, the popularity of action research has required district and higher education personnel to use more distance education delivery models to support educators in rural and remote schools. The challenge here is to keep to the pedagogical and collaborative tenets vibrant as more distance education strategies are employed in the ever expanding dissemination process. It is within this changing world of professional development and action research that a local and collaborative action research program evolved into a large dissemination project throughout the state of Utah.



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2

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*An Action Research Program*

Building upon years of instructional and evaluative knowledge about the role and design of a successful graduate action research program (Crow, Stokes, Kauchak, Hobbs, and Bullough,1996), a professional development effort was initiated in 1994 by four teacher educators from the University of Utah, Davis, Granite, and Salt Lake City School Districts. The teacher educators represented one full-time faculty member and three University/District Liaisons (half-time at the University of Utah and half-time in their respective district's Staff Development Offices). The goal of this collaborative venture was to design and implement a high quality professional development course for K12 educators using an action research model (Crow, Adams, Bachman, Peterson, Vickery, and Bernhardt, 1998). The subsequent course and U-LEARN (Utah Local Educators Action Research Network) program was developed and infused with guiding principles that grew out of the work by Judith Warren-Little (1993). Briefly, the U-LEARN principles focused upon creating a sustained community of learners that investigated locally based questions over a sustained period of time (Crow, Adams, Bachman, and Spencer, 2002). The first course was taught in 1995 to 30 K12 teachers and administrators in the three participating school districts. Taught onsite in various schools, the participants and instructor met for 90 minutes every week during a seven month period. Taught every year, participation in the six-credit semester course grew rapidly to 80 educators in 1998. By 1998, the U-LEARN began working with a consortium of seven rural school districts in central Utah called CUES (Central Utah Education Service area) to develop effective distance education delivery strategies for their rural educators. By May, 2002, the CUES/U-LEARN project had worked with close to 70 educators, including regular and special educators along with school administrators.

Then, in late 1999, the U-LEARN instructors were asked to develop a more state-wide action research initiative effort focused on providing the same quality action research program while exploring additional distance education instructional strategies. As with previous U-LEARN efforts the challenge focused on using the guiding principles of action research, contextually-driven collaboration coupled high instructional touch, classroom relevance, teacher empowerment, and appropriate academic rigor delivered using compatible distance education strategies. To honor the U-LEARN tenets for supporting collaborative efforts with local educators to create communities of learners, the Initiative organized the state of Utah into seven regional areas (see www.ed.utah.edu/ulearn). Each of the seven areas were represented by a local regional director (K12 administrator), one of the four University of Utah instructors, and a cadre of urban and rural assistant instructors called Lead Instructors. The coordination needed for recruiting participants was lead by the regional director and supported by the University instructor. Financial resources were supported from Goals2000 Grants, directed by the University instructor, and housed in the region's school district. By January 2002, the project began implementation.

Since the implementation of the Action Research Initiative, much as been learned about effective collaborative efforts, appropriate distance education strategies, and engaging instructional activities. The last year of the Initiative project is 2002-2003 and involves almost 80 educators located within urban, suburban, and rural Utah. Using program evaluation efforts along with instructor observations, there has been needed revision and refinement. While the U-LEARN guiding principles have not been altered, the instructional approaches used within that framework have evolved throughout the project.

*Collaborative Efforts and Factors*

One of the five regions in the Initiative program was located in a rural part of the state. Called Region Four, the program prior to the Fall 2002 was somewhat successful. The participants did utilize the online course developed for the Initiative project and completed some of its activities. Furthermore, about 50% of the original participants completed their action research projects on-time. It is difficult to fully determine why the online course delivery model failed to work in this project. Moreover, the evaluation data indicated that the onsite teaching components were overwhelming popular while the collaborative efforts between that year's Regional Director and University instructor were lukewarm at best.

Given this backdrop as well as the departure of the previous University instructor, two different U-LEARN instructors approached a new Regional Director about providing action research instruction to his rural educators and proposed moving away from the predominant online action research course to more traditional means of onsite teaching instruction enhanced by online course support. The Director sent "advertising flyers" for the action

research course out to the six school district consortium comprising Region Four. Immediately, Principal M (called M for this paper) from Rivers Intermediate School (fictitious name) contacted the instructors with a proposal. She wanted her entire school faculty involved in the action research class. Furthermore, she wanted her school to focus on one school-wide writing strategy and project. It should be noted that the school housed fifth and sixth grades resulting in 967 students as well as 32 educators, including special educators, school counselor and administrators.

With the support of the grant resources and the Regional Director, the project was given the go-ahead to proceed for 2002-2003. After several telephone conversations in which the U-LEARN principles were discussed along with the descriptive needs outlined by Principal M, a curricular timeline was prepared around three primary onsite teaching sessions, including one initial eight hour session in the October and two sessions of three hours each scheduled in December and April. The instructors understood that school would focus on a specific writing strategy and create a range of appropriate action research projects to study a myriad implementation, student achievement and school change issues.

With this initial work achieved, the real collaborative efforts began as the two instructors drove 300 miles to Rivers Intermediate School and visited Principal M on the day before the October, eight hour teaching. The meeting occurred in Principal M's office. The instructors asked her to describe her needs for a school-wide improvement project based on scores received from the state's U-PASS competency and standardized tests administered during Spring 2002. Principal M believed that the tests indicated that the schools' educators needed to focus on a particular writing dimension. Furthermore, she argued that the schools' educators, including administrators, special educators, school counselors, and regular teachers needed to implement a school-wide instructional writing strategy and use the action research process to study the same inquiry question. Additionally, Principal M was clear that while this was her assessment of the test results and implications, the school's educators had not thoroughly discussed the implications of the test results. She was very open to seeing where her faculty went with the test result data and the "one action research" project. Principal M was clear that while the instructional intervention might vary, she strongly hoped that the school faculty would see a need to work together on the same intervention and action research project.

As the conversation developed that autumn afternoon, the University instructors realized several new twists to their prepared eight-hour teaching session. Firstly, the collaboration efforts took on a whole-new spin moving from collaborative logistical involvement to collaborative instructional relationships. Secondly, the instructional time would need to be reorganized to support a "facilitative" model of participant interaction, direction determination as well as action research instruction. Thirdly, in almost 14 years of action research model implementation, the instructors faced an imposing and new challenge involving one school, one action strategy intervention, and only one action research question/design for 32 participants. Fourthly, both instructors were effective group facilitators and had worked with many groups in other aspects of their careers. Therefore, the instructors realized that they needed to bring together their facilitative skills gleamed from one aspect of their careers' activities and combine it with their instructional strategies.

While information about the Rivers Intermediate School teaching model is further described in the paper's next section, it should be noted that the collaborative relationship between the University instructors, Principal M and the school's faculty members has continued to grow and sustain the efforts required to facilitate the school-wide improvement and action research project.

*Teaching Model*

As noted in the section above, the teaching timeline was composed of three sessions scheduled for October (eight-hour session) and December (3 hours) 2002 and April 2003 (three-hour). All sessions were taught on-site in the school's Media Center. Teachers used their weekly staff development sessions to provide the needed time together. The participants were paid $225 for their involvement and provided with an action research textbook and The Action Research Workbook.

Also noted earlier, the first teaching session was structured around a more "facilitative" model of interaction required to focus the group on the various test score data, analyze it and arrive at a productive conclusion. Once the group analyzed and moved to consensus around the need to improve the 5$^{th}$ and 6$^{th}$ grade students' specific writing skills that Principal M had envisioned, the University instructors moved into arena of

teaching the participants the action research process and applying it to their designated topic area. Furthermore, by the end of the first session, the educators had selected 'one' question and 'one' possible project design as well as started on a cooperative search of the educational literature. The second teaching session in December asked the participants to share the findings from their literature searches, analyze the findings, determine a writing skill intervention, finalize their project design, design appropriate ethical considerations, and determine timeline as well as data collection responsibilities. The third session will be taught in April. While the purposes of this session are to: a) analyze the data and b) determine the presentation, the collaborative process along with the needs of the faculty continue to negotiate the best use of the April session.

*Preliminary Results*

First and foremost, the collaborative perspectives and actions valued by the University instructors and the school's principal and faculty have shaped and sustained this unique project. These collaborative principles require bringing together the 'primary participants' together for an open-ended discussion and in supportive environment. The 'primary participants' must be defined by those stakeholders who are closest to the actual implementation activities. In this case study, the 'primary participants' were the school's principal, the course instructors, and the faculty members. An open-ended discussion refers to listening to principles and interests, asking questions, considering alternatives, proposing possibilities, focusing on common goals, and selecting appropriate achievement means. A supportive environment means that each participant must be able to share their foundational and guiding principles while at the same time, each participant must listen carefully to fully understand each other's principles and interests.

With each passing teaching session, the collaborative dialogue continues to focus on the faculty efforts and their pupils' learning needs. The relationship and project have been successful because all parties have focused on their guiding principles while being flexible in how they achieved success. Each collaborative participant brings different needs and perspectives into the discussion, these differences always contain the potential to derail the collaborative process. Ultimately, the collaborative goal of improved student learning focuses the group's goals, discussions, hopes, concrete objectives, and next steps. Much like a spoked wheel with a center hub, placing the child at the center ties together different needs and interests. For this reason alone, this collaborative venture should continue to be successful and accomplish the stated needs.

Secondly, when effectively used, onsite teaching continues to be powerful, rich, and meaningful delivery model for instructors and participants. This requires combining engaging instructional strategies with usable curriculum applied to each participant's own contextually driven classroom needs. This pedagogical combination produces powerful interactions, meaningful instructional activities, productive group work, shared reflection, and synergistic learning that can be immediate while long-lasting. This is not to suggest that onsite teaching is the only effective medium for distance education delivery. However, what onsite teaching does offer 'experienced' teachers and instructors from the 'analogy generation' are the known, comfortable and easily accessible instructional activities as well as familiar learning environments. The instructional strategies can be easily adapted at a moments notice and based on immediate observational data collected from several senses, including, sight; sound; and touch.

Thirdly, it is possible to work with one school faculty, delivering one action strategy or intervention, and gathering data based on a common design. It should be noted that the faculty has continued to meet apart from the University instructors. The meetings focus on arriving at the most, perceived effective action strategy based on the educational literature search and personal experiences. As a result, the data gathering efforts will be limited to a two-month period. The data will not be sufficient to generate appropriate analysis beyond a pilot-study phase. Therefore, the April session may focus on analysis of the initial data and the newly implemented writing strategy intervention. It is anticipated that the school year 2003-2004 will provide the needed year-long format required for instructional strategy implementation and data gathering and analysis efforts.

Fourthly, the Action Research Workbook proved to be an effective professional development instructional manual providing audience, instructor, and situational flexibility. Furthermore, the modular structure and specific learning activities developed over years of teaching action research to a variety of participants continued to provide engaging, reflective, and conceptually-sound applied activities for groups and individuals. The Workbook designed in a modular fashion allowed the instructors to flexibility plan and use a myriad of learning activities for their specific teaching needs. The Workbook activities were created around introducing the action research process,

exploring possible topics, conducting a school history, conducting an educational literature review, specifying a question, understanding ethical issues, designing appropriate ethical precautions, creating an action research design, identifying appropriate data sources along with methods, collecting data, analyzing quantitative as well as qualitative data, and structures for presenting the inquiry story.

It should be noted that the Action Research Workbook reflected the structure, concepts, learning activities, and design created for the Online Action Research course developed for usage during the Action Research State Initiative. Deemed as too much work and overwhelming, the online course's conceptual and instructional elements provided an instructor workbook with "pull-out" modules for a variety of audiences, instructor needs, and program goals. The Action Research Workbook provided successful instructional activities, aided conceptual understanding, stimulated participant reflection, guided individual work and supported group thinking.

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